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The Whole Horse: Walter Sullivan and the State of Southern Letters



In his controversial memoir *Making It*, Norman Podhoretz characterizes the several generations of writers associated with the *Partisan Review* as "The Family." It should be clear by now that modern southern literature is also a multi-generational family, with its share of filial loyalties and sibling rivalries. The Vanderbilt branch of that family came into being with the birth of John Crowe Ransom in 1888

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and Donald Davidson in 1893. The major figures of the second generation (Tate, Lytle, Brooks, and Warren) first saw the light of day between 1899 and 1906. Thus Walter Sullivan, who was born in 1924, is one of the youngest members of the third generation. As such, he is too young to have been a part of the southern renascence but old enough to feel that he missed out on something important. Those facts go a long way toward explaining Sullivan's sense of himself as a writer and critic of fiction.

I

In one of his most memorable statements, Andrew Lytle said of his generation (the one preceding Sullivan's) that it "was the last moment of equilibrium... the last time a man could know who he was. Or where he was from. It was the last time a man, without having to think, could say what was right and what was wrong." In his criticism, Walter Sullivan has done a good deal of thinking about what is right and what is wrong. In his Lamar Memorial Lectures (collected in 1976 under the title A Requiem for the Renascence), he argues that modern southern literature began to decline when the moral culture of the South became too weak to sustain the collective myth upon which the renascence had been based.

That myth postulated a glorious southern past, which could be recovered only in song and story. Those who had possessed that past in fact (i.e. the earlier generations of southern patriots) either took it for granted or spent themselves trying to defend it. The writers of the renascence had the literary good fortune to come along at a time when the myth of the past still lived in the collective imagination. (The resulting tension produced what Sullivan refers to as the "götter-dammerung theory of southern literature.") Their successors, however, belong to an age in which the southern myth is regarded as not only lost but (what is far worse) irrelevant. It sometimes seems that to be a writer in the South today, one must be either an assimilationist or an anachronism.

As much as he values the southern myth and the great literature it produced, Walter Sullivan is too much of a realist to want to turn back the clock. What is more to the point, he believes that the myth was bound to fail because, for all its appeal, it was essentially a gnostic heresy. Protestant Christianity was an essential part of the culture of the old South, but as a force shaping the lives of men it became increasingly subordinated to the secular authority of family, community, and tradition. (As Allen Tate noted in his contribution to I'll Take My Stand, it was a religion of only part of the horse, when a religion of the whole horse was needed.) The future southern

utopia envisioned in the nineteenth century by Henry Timrod and Robert Barnwell Rhett became the Edenic southern past recreated by twentieth-century romantics such as Margaret Mitchell. That both these earthly paradises were unreal goes without saying. What Sullivan finds far more damning is that they were based on an immanent (even pagan) metaphysic. In our own time that metaphysic has not taken the form of deifying a particular image of society (except perhaps among orthodox Marxists), but of sacramentalizing the artist as an enemy of society. For both the artist and the community that has been a disastrous turn of events.

Sullivan supports his generalizations about the decline of recent southern fiction by citing the postwar work of such major writers as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Robert Penn Warren. (Go Down, Moses was the last of Faulkner's great novels; The Optimist's Daughter is not as good as The Golden Apples; and the renascence itself ended with the publication of All the King's Men.) Moreover, he does not find much hope for the revival of the renascence in the sensationalism of such modern apostates as William Styron and Cormac McCarthy, whose stylistic brilliance is not matched by any piety for myth and community; or in the existentialist musings of Walker Percy, whom Sullivan admires more as a thinker than a craftsman. There may be more good writers in the South today than at any previous time, but there are fewer great ones. Of those who came to prominence as late as the 1950's, only Flannery O'Connor makes it into Sullivan's pantheon of major figures. And her sense of myth and community was finally less southern than Catholic.

If Sullivan is right, then the death of southern literature is simply an instance of the death of literature in general. His most compelling case for that view is stated not in A Requiem for the Renascence, but in his earlier essay "The New Faustus: The Southern Renascence and the Joycean Aesthetic." Here, Sullivan argues that James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is the sacred text of those who see the world (both this one and the one to come) as well lost for the sake of art. By placing himself apart from the community and above God, the artist who adopts the Joycean aesthetic becomes a modern Faustus who has sold his soul for a kind of earthly magic.

The spiritual folly of such a trade is evident to any believing Christian; however, it is not primarily as a Christian but as a literary critic that Sullivan writes. He is concerned with the damage that the Joycean aesthetic has done to art itself. Properly understood, art is a means of expressing reverence for the mystery and complexity of life. When the means becomes an end (indeed the end), it loses its connection with life and drifts into either despair or self-referentiality. (Marlowe's Faustus ended up as a cheap magician and practical jokester.) That this should finally have happened even in the South indicates the seriousness of our present predicament.

"The New Faustus" is one of eight essays in Sullivan's remarkable little book Death by Melancholy. Although the lectures in A Requiem for the Renascence probably played well from the podium, they appear a bit too schematic and opinionated on the printed page. Death by Melancholy, however, reveals Sullivan to be an extraordinarily astute reader of literature as well as an impassioned polemicist. His technical intelligence (which is probably due in part to his own labors in the craft of fiction) is immense. He can spot the virtues and defects of a particular writer's work as well as any critic in the business. He has sufficient integrity to identify what is good in the work of writers he despises and what is less than successful in the efforts of those he admires. Consider, for example, his explanation of why Flannery O'Connor's natural metier was short fiction:

Complex characterization is the sine qua non of the novel: the characters must not only have epiphanies: they must change and develop in terms of what they have done and seen. It was the nature of Flannery O'Connor's fictional vision that discovery on the part of her people was all. When one has witnessed the flaming bush or the tongues of fire or the descending

dove, the change is final and absolute, and whatever happens thereafter is anticlimax. This is why the characters in O'Connor's novels fade and become static and often bore us with their sameness before we are done with the book. But fulfilling their proper roles — that is of revelation, discovery—in the short stories, they are not boring, and they do what they were conceived to do.

П

In taking an insistently moral view of literature and the literary vocation, Sullivan has left himself open to attack from aesthetes, modernists and postmodernists, ethical relativists, New South progressives, smart aleck reviewers, and the sort of individuals who can publish their views only by defacing the margins of library books. A particularly ignorant and meanspirited example of such hostility is Thomas L. McHaney's review of A Requiem for the Renascence, published in the Winter 1976-77 issue of the Mississippi Quarterly.

To begin with McHaney, who never misses an opportunity to find minor errors in the scholarship of others, twice refers to the book he is reviewing as A Requiem for the Renaissance, rather than the Renascence. He accuses Sullivan of failing to support his literary judgments, while McHaney himself dogmatically asserts that the fiction of Andrew Lytle, Warren's All the King's Men, and Tate's The Fathers are not worth the attention Sullivan lavishes on them. Moreover, McHaney is certain that that attention is a function of "shared associations with Vanderbilt University." For good measure, he reaches back nearly fifty years to haul out a stale and largely irrelevant anti-Agrarian canard. Reading Sullivan, smirks McHaney, "almost makes one who would write in and about the South afraid to have running water in his house."

The literary hit men are likely to be back in full force with the publication of Sullivan's forthcoming book In Praise of Blood Sports and Other Essays. To paraphrase John Crowe Ransom, Walter Sullivan is neither reconstructed nor regenerate. In fact, his theological position is even more sharply defined as a result of his conversion to Roman Catholicism. The only important differences between this book and Sullivan's previous collections are that Blood Sports contains essays on the modern British writers Joseph Conrad, Elizabeth Bowen, Evelyn Waugh, and William Golding (none of whom went to Vanderbilt); while two of the southern pieces (those on Richard Weaver and Andrew Lytle) are written in an engaging personal voice previously absent from Sullivan's criticism.

In "Richard Weaver and the Bishop's Widow: A Cautionary Tale," Sullivan begins by recalling a fiction writing class he taught in the summer of 1958. One of his students, the widow of an Episcopal bishop, persisted in creating "characters who were free of fault and immune to error." In an attempt to convince her that a belief in original sin is essential to creating a fully realized fictional world, he played her a tape of Richard Weaver's lecture on "Contemporary Southern Literature." Faced with Weaver's argument for innate depravity, the widow said to Sullivan, "I am surprised. I thought you were the or!y person left in the world who thought that way." Secretly Sullivan "half agreed with her." "Many believed in evil," he writes, "but few believed in sin."

Not only was Richard Weaver one of the few who did believe in sin, he was also one of the most articulate defenders of southern culture to write in this century. Sullivan calls him the "St. Paul of the Vanderbilt Agrarians." Although he was born too late to be one of the original twelve, he kept the Agrarian faith when Ransom, Warren, Tate, and others were moving on to different interests and different creeds. (Of the original group, only Donald Davidson never wavered in his commitment to the cause.) Ironically, Weaver's reverence for the traditional South was enhanced by his exile in Chicago. Whenever he crossed the Mason-Dixon Line, he couldn't help sensing the cultural superiority of his old home to his current place of residence. Perhaps for this reason, he was less aware of changes in the South than those who

had never left. At the time of his death, he had accepted a faculty position at Vanderbilt. Whether living in present-day Nashville would have changed his view of southern culture is something we will never know. In any event, just about every subsequent champion of the traditional South sees himself as following in Weaver's footsteps.

As much as Sullivan admired Weaver as both a person and thinker, he believes that Weaver's view of religion was far too amorphous. Like John Crowe Ransom before him, Weaver argued that a sense of the transcendent was essential to a healthy culture. True as this might be, it is essentially an instrumentalist view of religion. In God Without Thunder and elsewhere, Ransom contended that religion existed for the sake of its ritual rather than its dogma. (There is more than a little truth to the surmise of Yvor Winters that what Ransom really wanted was thunder without God.) Even if this is true, it is clear that the evangelical Protestantism native to the South would not do for what the Agrarians had in mind. Sensing that this is the case, the latterday Weaverite Marion Montgomery tries to make honorary southerners out of such Anglo and Roman Catholic traditionalists as T. S. Eliot and Jacques Maritain. In so doing he suggests, however subtly, that the common bond of temperament is more important than substantive differences in theology. This may simply be an instrumentalism of a different stripe. "I confess to being befuddled," Sullivan writes, "by a system that attempts to answer Tate's objection to the southern religion by claiming that Thomists are Confederates at heart."

If the instrumentalist approach is the wrong way to apprehend religion, it is precisely the way that art ought to be viewed. In his affectionate tribute "Andrew Lytle: The Mythmaker at Home," Sullivan cites André Malraux's observation that "we began to think of statues and paintings and cunningly wrought artifacts as art only after we had diverted them from their intended purposes and, in many cases, removed them from their proper locations." This is true of crucifixes and holy pictures and figures of saints, which were originally intended to aid the faithful in their worship. It is also true of portraits, which were once painted or carved to commemorate a family's history or to celebrate great events in the collective life of a community. Today we have taken the statue from the temple, the crucifix from the church, and the portrait from the living room wall and gathered them under the roof of a museum. "All these objects are given a new reason for being: they are no longer aids to worship or to memory, but works of art to be admired for themselves."

To Sullivan's mind, this segregation and deification of art has led us down a slippery slope that finally allows Faulkner to say "that in order to do his work, a writer would and should steal from his grandmother." Fortunately, there are still a few writers who do not subscribe to this homespun version of the Joycean aesthetic, who realize that it is more important to be a good man than to be a good artist. Andrew Lytle is one of them. "[I]n A Wake for the Living," Sullivan writes, "he refutes the notion of robbing one's grandmother for the sake of art by putting his own grandmother — and his aunts and uncles and cousins — into a book. They and his affection for them become parts of his art and not enemies of it." More than anything else it is this sense of life's wholeness that is missing in so much contemporary literature, both in the South and elsewhere.

A man who valued and sought this sense of wholeness in his art without ever achieving it in his life was Sullivan's friend and mentor Allen Tate. In his gracefully written memoir Allen Tate: A Recollection, Sullivan confronts the paradoxes of Tate's character with a mixture of candor and affection. He writes of a man who believed in the moral dictates of the Catholic Church, while living a life marred by adultery and divorce. Philosophically Tate was one of the most conservative of the Fugitive-Agrarians, and artistically one of the most bohemian. By turns he could be charming and nasty, loyal and petty. Despite a nearly total commitment to his art, he started many more projects than he finished. Like Robinson's Miniver Cheevy, he "scorned

the gold he sought / But sore annoyed was he without it." He seemed to excite contradictory passions in virtually everyone who knew him. His friend Brainard Cheney once said of him, while pounding his fist on his own dinner table, "He's a monster! God damn it, he's a monster! But I love him."

Technically, Sullivan's memoir seems to owe much to the new journalism. His use of dialogue, point of view, setting, and characterization are novelistic in the best sense of the term. Consider his use of one of the most effective and popular narrative devices of the twentieth century — the peripheral narrator. In this kind of story, an intelligent observer (Marlow, Nick Carraway, Jack Burden) finds his life intertwined with that of a dynamic and enigmatic protagonist. For Walter Sullivan the fateful meeting came in April, 1943, when he was a nineteen-year-old Vanderbilt sophomore.

Only a few months shy of his induction into the Marine Corps, Sullivan was invited to spend a week with several other young writers at the home of Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon in Monteagle, Tennessee. There he met Peter Taylor, Robert ("Cal") Lowell, and Lowell's wife Jean Stafford. After everyone had been drinking a good deal on Saturday night, "Jean asked Peter if he agreed that Cal was the greatest poet who ever lived. When Peter said no, she threw a jar of mayonnaise in his direction. It missed Peter and broke against the wall." Later that night Sullivan, whose room was separated by only a thin partition from that of a female guest, "was awakened by the sound of Allen's making love." The utter recklessness of this action, taken in a house full of people with his wife down the hall, suggests that for Tate danger added to the thrill of sex.

Sullivan's narrative is episodic, as his contacts with Tate were spread over several decades; however, the most sustained and intimate period of their relationship came during the last decade of the poet's life, when Tate and his third wife — the former nun Helen Heinz — lived in Monteagle and Nashville, Tennessee. During those years, the young Mrs. Tate (half her husband's age) gave birth to three children and lost one in a bizarre nursery accident. Within a short time, she found herself responsible for the care of two small children and a bedridden old man whose body was wasting away with emphysema. Based on the bare facts of the situation, one is tempted to feel sor— for Helen Tate; however, Sullivan deprives us of that easy response by painting a harmonic for Helen Tate; however, sullivan deprives us of that easy response by painting a harmonic for Helen Tate; however, sullivan deprives us of that easy response by painting a harmonic for Helen Tate; however, sullivan deprives us of that easy response by painting a harmonic for Helen Tate; however, sullivan deprives us of that easy response by painting a harmonic for Helen Tate; however, sullivan deprives us of that easy response by painting a harmonic for Helen Tate; however, sullivan deprives us of that easy response by painting a harmonic for Helen Tate; however, sullivan deprives us of that easy response by painting a harmonic for Helen Tate; however, sullivan deprives us of the sullivan deprives us of that easy response by painting a harmonic for Helen Tate; however, sullivan deprives us of the sullivan deprives u

The tendency in writing about the Fugitive-Agrarians is either to lionize or attack them. Sullivan undertakes the more difficult task of presenting them as he knew them. Because he is himself an insider, he can get away with telling the truth without seeming like a gossip or a snitch. As Robert B. Heilman recently pointed out in the Sewance Review, Sullivan takes Tate's greatness as a given. He is writing for readers who share that assumption and who are already familiar with the public careers of the many figures mentioned in his pages (a helpful identifying list of around ninety of them precedes the narrative proper). Persons who really don't care about the rift between Tate and Lytle or the literary politics behind selecting the editor of the Sewanee Review are likely to respond to this book as one uninterested in politics might respond to the plethora of Washington talk shows on cable television. (For junkies such as myself, it is precisely these features that make the book so mesmerizing.) However, anyone with even a passing interest in modern southern literature, not to mention good writing, should read Sullivan's marvelously evocative portraits of Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Andrew Lytle. Sullivan makes you think you knew these people or at least wish that you had.

in the context of southern culture. His first novel, Sojourn of a Stranger (1957), treats the southern past directly by being an historical narrative; however, its larger meanings seem intended also for a contemporaneous audience. Surprisingly, the statement this novel makes about tradition, race, and what Faulkner called "the human heart in conflict with itself" were generally ignored by early reviewers, who seemed more interested in discussing Sullivan's success in recreating middle Tennessee during the ante-bellum years. (Judged solely on those terms, Sojourn is a superbly well realized piece of fiction.) That is probably just as well, because Sullivan's social and moral vision is not well suited to an age of liberal millenialism.

Because the novel's protagonist, Allen Hendrick, is the son of a southern aristocrat and a New Orleans octoroon, readers might expect another Faulknerian tale of sexual betrayal and family doom. However, the aristocrat is no Massa-in-the-woodpile but a liberal humanitarian; and the octoroon is neither a slave girl nor a kept woman but his lawfully wedded wife. Everything that Major Marcus Hendrick does is motivated by an admirable sense of social justice. He drops out of a promising law practice when the senior partner wins the acquittal of a man who murdered one of his slaves; he forsakes real estate speculation when asked to defraud a widow; and he marries his wife when the Kentucky planter whose mistress she had been returns home. He frees his slaves only to discover that they are even more helpless and shiftless than when they were in bondage. And he dies of apoplexy when he reads that South Carolina has seceded from the union.

The late twentieth-century reader is likely to sympathize with Marcus Hendrick and regret that there were not more like him in the old South. And yet, his good will creates problems for others. Speaking of Marcus's marriage, Andrew Lytle writes: "His act is an irresponsible act for two reasons: he ignores the inequalities of the social order without being able to find any concrete means to better the situation. And so he isolates himself and his wife from the society which surrounds him. At least in New Orleans the condition of the kept octoroon gave her a place and a society of a kind, but in violating the mores he not only cut her off from this but himself as well, establishing them both in a social vacuum." The situation seems to be resolved happily when Marcus's wife Lucy insists that the family return to Marcus's home turf of Gallatin, Tennessee, believing correctly that her son's grandfather will be so taken with the boy that all will be forgiven. Young Allen does inherit his grandfather's estate and wins the friendship and esteem of virtually everyone in the community. The only thing he lacks is the hand of the woman he loves. The taboo against miscegenation (especially when it is the man who carries the tainted blood) is just too strong for the girl's father to grant his consent.

When Allen's beloved, Katherine Rutledge, is denied permission to marry him, his love for her is gradually transformed into hatred for her father and brother Percy (a sort of headstrong Confederate Hotspur). This hatred sustains Allen through the hardships of the Civil War (which passes a bit too quickly as Sullivan brings the novel to a close), until he actually feels deprived by the death of old Rutledge and young Percy. Allen returns home after the war to find that his mansion has been burned by a perfidious free black who had always scorned the way Marcus's benevolence exposed his own inadequacies. Too late, Allen sees his own self-destructive animosities more crudely mirrored in the behavior of the black. Katherine is so guilt-stricken by the grief that her romance had brought to her father and brother that she refuses to marry Allen, even though she is finally free to do so. The only consolation with which he is left is increased self-knowledge.

If Allen is shocked by recognizing a kindred spirit in the free black Ben Hill, then what of the enlightened modern reader who has shared Allen's ambitions, loves, and hatreds? We cannot pronounce judgment on Allen without also pronouncing judgment on ourselves. There is much to admire in Allen and much to detest in his enemies. In an ideal society, neither he nor his mother would suffer discrimination

because of their alien blood. Blacks and whites should be free to intermarry as their love dictates, and bigoted fathers and brothers should not be able to prevent the happiness of others. But is it not the role of the novelist to bring about that ideal society. (As Auden wrote in his elegy on Yeats, "poetry makes nothing happen.") It would have been easy enough for Sullivan to criticize the inequities of the antebellum South (or for that matter of the South of the 1950's), but his concern is with the individual. Given the realities of the world in which he lived, Allen Hendrick should have shown greater sensitivity for the values of others and less passion for abstract justice. Because that simple message is so difficult to accept in an age that has elevated justice above every other social and personal good, Sojourn of a Stranger is a more courageous book than any dozen protest novels.

In The Long, Long Love (1959), Sullivan takes us to the Nashville of our own time. His protagonist is Horatio Adams, a wealthy and aging member of the southern aristocracy. After his wife's suicide (prompted in part by cancer and in part by having to live with Horatio), he is plunged into a period of depression and heavy drinking. When he meets and marries a beautiful young woman named Emily, Horatio begins putting his life back together. Unfortunately, his reverence for the past is so obsessive that he nearly falls apart again when vandals desecrate the grave of his grandfather, a Confederate general, on Halloween. In the meantime, Emily and Horatio's son Tavean fall in love and skip town together.

When Horatio tries to move his grandfather's body to a more secure family plot, he discovers that nobody is buried in the old man's grave at the Confederate cemetery thirty miles south of Nashville. Just before the desertion of his wife and son, Horatio dispatches his daughter's fiancé (a young history professor at Vanderbilt) to find where the general is really buried. In quick succession, Horatio learns that his fleeing son has been killed in a car wreck and that his grandfather had not fallen on the field of battle, but had been shot when he was apprehended in bed with another man's wife. After a humiliating encounter with a con lady in Florida (who gets him drunk and then rolls him), a chastened Horatio returns to Nashville and is reunited with Emily, whose pity he readily accepts as a kind of love.

In this novel Sullivan experiments with different points of view, allowing Horatio, his daughter Anne, and her fiancé Philip to tell the story. Although each voice is convincing on its own terms, the shifting perspectives deprive the book of the overarching critical intelligence that is necessary to make sense of Horatio Adams's life. In Horatio, Sullivan has given us a man whose piety for the southern past is everything that an Agrarian could want. And yet this piety goes a long way toward making life miserable for both Horatio and those closest to him. If tradition is the living faith of the dead and traditionalism the dead faith of the living, Horatio is clearly the victim of a moribund traditionalism. But Sullivan is finally too much in sympathy with Horatio to make this cautionary tale into an anti-Agrarian satire or polemic. By the same token, the younger people in Horatio's family are not sufficiently shallow or insensitive to make us admire the old guy as the lesser of two evils. We are finally asked to follow Emily's lead and give him our pity as well.

There is much to admire in *The Long, Long Love.* (The title, by the way, comes from the old Scottish ballad "The Daemon Lover.") The three narrators are believable and compelling; the action is well paced; and the thematic conflict between old South and new is clearly delineated. Some readers may be put off by Horatio's rhetoric (so florid as to be embarrassing in places), but it is entirely appropriate to his character. Others may find the ending too happy; however, it is at best an ambiguous happiness (who really wants to settle for pity as a kind of love?) and one that has been purchased with much suffering. What makes this novel finally less satisfactory than *Sojourn of a Stranger* is that the shifting perspectives tell us both too little and too much. Although Tavean and Emily are not inherently inplausible characters, we don't know as much as we need to about their motivations. Conse-

quently, in their case character seems molded by plot rather than plot being driven by character. On the other hand, we probably see more than we need to of the inner workings of Horatio's mind. It is doubtful that Gatsby would have been as sympathetic a character had Fitzgerald let him tell any of his own story.

The shifting omniscience of Sojourn allows Sullivan to give us a glimpse into any mind he chooses without forcing him to linger there longer than is necessary. Of course, first person narration creates greater empathy by giving us an identifiable speaking voice. If that was the correct technical choice for The Long, Long Love, I would have preferred a single narrator who was involved enough with Horatio to know his story yet detached enough to put it into perspective. Horatio's daughter's fiancé Philip Hokcomb might have been such a narrator.

As a southern history professor, Philip is sensitive to the burden of the past in the present. As Horatio's prospective son-in-law, he is around during much of the story and has every reason for wanting to know about things that he has not directly witnessed. (Consider the narrative sleight of hand that Fitzgerald employs to fill Nick in on Gatsby and Daisy's past.) What is equally important, he is sufficiently distanced from the principal characters to analyze and judge all of them. Holcomb does speak in his own voice when he tells us of his quest for Horatio's grandfather's grave site. What is going on in the present is also a mystery, but one that requires the sensibility of a philosopher rather than the instincts of a bloodhound. Like Warren's Jack Burden, Philip Holcomb is an historian who might have been equal to that task.

IV

In his essay "Southern Writers in Spiritual Exile," Sullivan writes: "The only way to recreate a South that is hospitable to the production of great literature is to recapture the sacred. I think, paradoxically perhaps, that the best way to do this is to seek the transcendent outside the ambience of southern imagery because the images of the South, familiar and beloved as they are, tempt us to believe that we have not lost our piety." If we want an example of what he is talking about, we need look no farther than Sullivan's own story "Elizabeth." Published in the Summer 1979 issue of the Sewanee Review, "Elizabeth" is set in an urban environment that is not recognizably southern; however, it is as unabashedly Catholic as anything written by Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene.

The title character is a young waitress who is married to an abusive and psychopathic husband. Herman "Lucky" Baker had been a celebrated halfback in high school, but "at under 140 pounds he was too small to play college football." (Sullivan clues us in to this quite subtly when he writes of Lucky, "he broke for a touchdown, scampering through a hole that future college players made for him.") Like the protagonist of Irwin Shaw's "The Eighty-Yard Run," everything after football is downhill for Lucky. He is too volatile ever to hold a job for very long, goes around with a grudge against the world, and beats his long-suffering wife. After a particularly savage pummelling causes her to lose the child she is carrying, Elizabeth moves out. The story ends when she is summoned to the police morgue to identify Lucky, who has been killed in a barroom brawl.

The sadly misnamed Lucky and the handful of minor characters are all convincingly drawn; however, the crowning achievement of this story is Sullivan's depiction of Elizabeth. Using third person limited point of view, he takes us into the mind of this troubled woman whose simple faith is shaken by the nightmare of her marriage. Significantly, the institutional church is of little help to her during her time of trial. One day after she has lost her child and left her husband, she enters a church to pray. She no longer has her rosary, which was stolen with her purse, and she doesn't even bother to light a candle to the Virgin. Sitting in a pew in the back of the church, she feels abandoned by God and man.

Like Blanche Dubois, Elizabeth depends on the kindness of strangers. When she is hospitalized after losing her baby, a young doctor shows her sympathy and gives

her five dollars to get home on. And Bernie Greenspan, the owner of the bar where she works, is invariably pleasant. But the most loving character of all is Bernie's wife Leah. She accompanies Elizabeth to the morgue, comforts her, and gives her a large bosom to cry on. While Elizabeth is in the morgue, images of her own life flash through her mind, until she is transported back to a day in her childhood when she and her family put flowers on the graves in the cemetery and prayed for the dead. "She was too weak to do anything but rest in Leah Greenspan's arms and cry and feel her thoughts drift — back to the cemetery, the autumn sky, the praying voices of the women. And she remembered how on that other day she had turned and seen, almost close enough for her to touch, a statue of the Mother of God rising above her." The grace Elizabeth has not foun... 'a the church building is ministered to her here by a Jewish mother very unlike the iconographic images of the Blessed Virgin. However, Sullivan leaves no doubt that it is grace that Elizabeth has experienced. She is able to forgive Lucky and to reach far enough into her past to recover a faith that is almost literally childlike.

No one is likely to mistake "Elizabeth" for a story about cultural traditionalism or Agrarian piety, and yet if Sullivan is right, this is precisely the sort of story that southerners ought to be writing and reading. Unfortunately, the Confederate and Thomist sensibilities have not proved to be an easy mix. For reasons of temperament easily inferred from Sullivan's memoir, Allen Tate's Catholicism was only inadequately realized in his life and art. Flannery O'Connor was a much more promising figure, but she died too young. Those contemporary writers who seem most obviously influenced by her work (Sullivan mentions Bobbie Ann Mason) have kept the gothic local color and dispensed with the religious belief. At the other end of the spectrum we have Walker Percy, a Catholic convert whose work is too much tinged by European existentialism to be entirely relevant to southern culture. What is needed are writers who exemplify the distinction that Jacques Maritain made between art and poetry. "By Art I mean the creative or producing, work-making activity of the human mind," writes Maritain. "By Poetry I mean . . . that intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self which is a kind of divination." By this definition Walter Sullivan, as critic, fictionist, and man of letters is an artist striving to be a poet. In showing us how and why the southern renascence came to an end, he may be pointing the way to a new beginning. - Mark Royden Winchell

Books in Brief

To Rise Above Principle: The Memoirs of an Unreconstructed Dean, By Josef Martin (pseud.)

Urbana and Chicago: U. of Illinois Press. \$19.95. (h.b.)

"Good grief! Someone has bugged my office — and it's all in this book!" That was my first reaction. Subsequent reading reduced paranoia (which can be an appropriate response to reality) to (mostly) delight. This Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at a large university recounts events as they happen behind the closed office door. It's a comfort to know that there are "universals" common to the profession in a position that often seems to deal with "particulars." Dean Martin (who is slated to reveal his true identity in Fall 1989 at a meeting of deans) depicts in graceful style his various encounters, not to ridicule but to reflect upon his professional principles and the academic ethics that govern his application of them. Happily, he can rise above principle when the occasion merits it.

The early chapters present cases in which he is confronted by requests from faculty, administrators, and lawyers, that challenge his sense of rightness. Here a reader will either laugh (in recognition) or weep (at having botched a similar situation). In narrating the case, he draws out the implications behind the surface encounter, for example, over a salary increment; the story is suspended while he explains his philosophy of deaning and the inherent academic values; then he tells the ending, rarely a happy one. He reveals himself as wise and witty; he feels the irritations and puzzlement that must be suppressed to carry out his responsibility.

As the book goes on, reflections by topic are stronger than particular cases, and, indeed, he has earned the right to take definitive positions on practices like committee work (as to its efficacy), evaluation, and the academic chain of command. There are hard sayings: "... a dean qua dean encounters no disinterested people" (p. 82); "The decision is supposed to be hard... because some people will not like it, not... in the sense of difficult to discern what the right course of action is" (p. 44).

From the high ground where he stands, he is impatient with academic women who exert pressure for advancement. The most devastating account involves a woman denied tenure who litigates for a meaningless vindication. He credits others as "capable women who never made any fuss" (p. 50) who move up the tenure and promotion ladder. Either his experience was neatly unambiguous, unlike that of colleagues elsewhere, or a blind spot is showing.

The chapter on "Tribal Stereotypes" is a send up of the characteristics (read idiosyncrasies) of practitioners of the various disciplines. Read it to see whether he hits the nail on the head or suffers a bruised thumb. And read it to see who come off best.

This would be fine gift to someone who has a few years of experience in a deanship; it might make the position seem daunting to a new one. To others in the academy it should be banned for revealing state secrets.

- Bridget Puzon
Dean of the College
Hollins College

A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters. By Julian Barnes. Knopf, \$18.95. (h.b.)

It is easy to be deceived by Barnes's recent novel. It appears to be merely a collection of different stories which do not come together as a thorough, complex novel. But if we read it closely we see that the title is a clue to serious meanings, sophisticated critiques. Barnes unites "history" and "word"; it is this linkage — its changing perspectives, its shifts of ontology — which underlies the amusing, philosophical pattern of the novel.

Each chapter exists as a commentary upon the previous one; there is a revisionist, comic tone which suggests that we cannot rest with any consistent view of virtue,
knowledge, wholeness. To quote the "woodworm" aboard Noah's Ark: "And it was
something beyond what we then knew. As if they were saying, you think this is the
worst. Don't count on it." The last sentence underlines the ultimate meaning of the
work.

Once we notice repeated references to the Ark and to *origins*, we try to fit them into a pattern we can "count on." But the pattern is continually changing. And it is the changing inconsistent "playful" perspectives which alert us to the fact that history itself—and the world and the word—are subject to incongruities, reversals, inversions (perversions, diversions).

Thus the "disturbed" survivor of an atomic attack — she is a kind of Noah after the Flood — says that she is "going round in circles," that the world itself "does the same thing." She — and the world — is a case of "double stress," of confusing coincidences, possible connections. The survivor, indeed, may be imagining — creating — a historical event which occurs in her own wrenched desires: she is a "fabulist." She says about her authoritative doctor — a patriarchal figure: "First he tells me I'm projecting myself on the world, then he tells me I'm doing what we all know the world does all the time." Is there significance out "there" in the "world" or only in one's mind?

In the alarming complexities of "Shipwreck" Barnes offers a widely known historical perspective on a particular shipwreck. The shipwreck becomes the subject of a famous French painting. But the painting eliminates, distorts, revises the event so that we are unclear about both: "What has happened? The painting has slipped history's anchor." There is, in effect, no "anchor" — we see that art uses reality in such a way that it eliminates or adds to it. And we are forced to wonder whether the painting is somehow more "real" than the event it supposedly portrays. And to complicate matters: Barnes inserts a reproduction of the painting in "full color" in his text. Thus we have two "paintings": the real one (which ironically is described by language) and the reproduction. Is language able to explain — or even describe — painting?

And so it goes — we are offered clues throughout the novel, repeated references to sacrifice, survival, shipwreck, ark, flood. We want to join them, but we realize we cannot put the parts together. We are frustrated. I take it that Barnes deliberately shipwrecks us so that we are drowned in (im)possible significances. We are survivors; we resemble many of the characters who are not certain where they are, why they exist.

The work, therefore, mirrors itself (as each chapter mirrors the preceding one) and it becomes a world of words we want to capture and dominate. But it eludes us at every turn. There is nothing we can hold onto, no stability we can grasp. And yet in an ironic, paradoxical way we understand that "uncertainty" itself is a *certainty*. Or is it?

The "final" chapter — does time exist in the novel and/or in the world? — has a narrator who tries to understand the meaning of heaven. He has survived earthly life; he is another super-Noah. But he is unsure about his identity, his "dream" of — or real presence in — heaven. We expect answers from him. He simply says: "No,

I wanted to be judged, do you see? It's what we all want. I wanted, oh, some kind of summing up."

Barnes suggests that there is no "summing up," no eternal judgment, no history, politics, identity. And he also maintains in a witty, brutal way, that we "survivors" — of what? — are in deep seas. We do not know where we began or where we will end. He does more: he implies that we don't "begin" (origin) or end (final solution). We are still confined in the Ark.

— Irving Malin

Engendering the Word: Feminist Essays in Psychosexual Poetics. rd. Temma F. Berg, Anna Shannon Elfenbein, Jeanne Larsen, and Elisa Kay Sparks. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, \$12.95. (p.e.)

Engendering the Word is a collection of feminist essays addressing the crucial relationship between women and language. Do women use language differently? Sharing the assumption that "language and psychosexual identity are deeply interconnected," the contributors delve into the common matter (often "mater") that links women's writing and female identity formation — the connections between the development of language and the development of sexual identity. While not subscribing to any single theory, they nonetheless circle around a central belief — that women "need to claim, reclaim, and proclaim a sense of identity, a language, a style of their own."

In many ways, this book is both a reclamation and proclamation, looking back to the seminar which engendered the collection itself (Sandra Gilbert's course in American Sexual Poetics at the 1984 School of Criticism and Theory), and looking back as well through a decade and a half of feminist criticism. But the power of the book is in what is proclaims: women do have a voice, a language to discover. Women's language may not be an essentially different language, but it is a language long suppressed, recently uncovered, and full of possibilities not only for women writers but for the fate of the "word" itself. This is a forceful proclamation grounded in feminist and psychoanalytic theory. But it is also grounded in readings of diverse women writers (and some men) — including American poets (Dickinson, Moore, Eliot, Rich, and H. D.), Anglo, Caribbean, and Latin American writers (Rhys, Puig, Agustini, Storni), French feminists (Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray), and Anglo and Native American novelists (Woolf, Robinson, Silko). What unites this book is the desire to come to terms with women's word; what diffuses that unity are the different ways in which women transform the word — at once creating a common language, and yet a language richly variegated in its range and voices.

There are stimulating essays in each of the book's three sections on theory, boundaries, and women's language. I found Temma Berg's review of various theories of feminine/poetic language, and Leigh Gilmore's revisioning of woman's gaze, particularly useful for the way they set before us emerging and promising theoretical contexts. The essays by Marilee Lindemann, Laura DeAbruna, and Maria Rosa Olivera-Williams explore cross-cultural material and refreshingly new literary

territory. And Jeanne Larsen's attempt not only to describe the possibilities of "woman's voice," but to speak herself in that voice, begins to explore perhaps the most exciting territory of all — a creative language emerging in women's critical writing. In this sense, Engendering the Word is not just about the "genders" of language and writing, but about a new language being "engendered," being born. Thankfully, it does not tell the same old story . . . "in the beginning was the word." What it tells us instead is that a new word is beginning.

— Ruth Salvaggio

Dreams of Distant Lives, By Lee K. Abbott. New York: G. P. Putnam's & Sons, \$18.95. (h.b.)

Love, marriage, separation, and divorce are the primary concerns in *Dreams of Distant Lives*, Lee K. Abbott's fourth collection of short stories. New Mexico, golf, alcohol, cars, and nostalgia abound in these stories; eight out of 10 are told by a male first-person narrator who is suffering or has recently suffered a loss.

In this era of minimalism, Abbott is a refreshing "maximalist" who revels in a baroque prose style, the hallmarks of which are elaborate explanations, justifications, and descriptions. Some of the most amusing wordplay comes from triads of similes: "The times I told this story of first love while it was going on, I screwed it up — its parts mismated, its time haywire as that in nightmares, or its people like made-up creatures from storybooks..." the narrator begins in "Here in Time and Not."

The most interesting stories are those in which the narrator takes action to change his life. "Revolutionaries" chronicles a lifetime friendship between two young men. One has gone the standard route: school, respectable job, country club, children; the other takes a detour after college and becomes a militant radical on the run. The limits of friendship are tested one night when the radical leaves his child with the respectable. The latter decides to never again see the former, which is why he is compelled to tell the story. "Why I live in Hanoi" is a moving account of a young man who deserts the army in Vietnam; told in the character's voice, it is full of interesting details and jargon. "The View of Me From Mars" surveys the life of Eliot Polk, an admitted adulterer. This fact doesn't bother Polk; that he urges his son to corroborate a lie, however, does. The story ends here, so the reader may only speculate on the outcome. Perhaps the best story in the book, and the longest, is "1963." This is the story of Chappy's coming of age—by losing his virginity. Told in the third person, this character is more differentiated than those who say "I, I, I."

If you enjoy these stories, don't miss Abbott's second collection, *Love is the Crooked Thing*, especially "The Final Proof of Fate and Circumstance." In an era when choppy language is used to recount stunted emotions, *Dreams of Distant Lives* is refreshing as a good night's sleep full of R. E. M.

- Maxwell Grandin

The Hyacinth Girl

Yesterday's post from her might have started: "Ides of March. Sunny. Southerly breezes.

Mercury 74° F, climbing." She cultivated gentle paths colored by forsythia falling as yellow founts, hydrangea touching the panes, crepe myrtle bordering fencerows. Workfolk on rainy days nodded

at her red hyacinths growing beneath ancient oaks lifting clouds. Those later years she survived her kin and filled her long days with April's gentle blooms. Neighbors called to marvel at the hyacinths she fetched from wet gardens; she offered fragrant boughs even today daughters remember as alive and breathing.

When winter's cold axis bowed to spring, she passed away asleep, peaceful journey south. The gardens were cut for rental property. April her true colors showed again: snowdrop narcissus, buttery jonquil, painterly iris, and set against the porch as if pressed from wax, stirring in a gentle breeze were healing, red hyacinths.

- Edward C. Lynskey

So What?

perhaps

it is an over-

reaction kicking

in every newspaper machine on

Haight St but

that machine at Haight &

Fillmore should

not have eaten my quarter with-

out coughing out a

paper & then that blindman should

not have tried to walk right over

me as if he couldn't

see &

that woman terrified at my

machine bashing should not have tried to run me

down just

because I was walking against the

light/so

what if I did kick in 7 newpaper machines &

throw

all those Chronicles into

the street

wouldn't you

?

- Fritz Hamilton

Meditations: 4

I needed more than just a course in college,
For I received my god from someone's myth
About a death-producing fruit of knowledge
A fallen angel tricked my parents with.
And I dreamed Cain to come and kill all snakes,
Disturb the grave of Abel's bashed in skull
And tell the sworded angel, "Your god fakes,
And with the graves of God, I am fed full."
While drunk, I cursed the kin I could not leave
And never finished writing well cast Cain,
Until he came himself to the belief
That in his horror he had left unslain
His father, source of hardened, drunken sin,
Who coiled 'round Eve and would not let him in.

- Michael Graves

A Day On The Water

I opened a can of tuna for lunch and cried, realizing that in my lover I espied the qualities of a fish. He sports a spangled silver look, shuns intimacy with scaly armor, and writhes on a hook. My man gaily dances on a pin that is sticking in his throat with a bitter pricking. Charming, ambitious, a soul in torment, he riles the water with his discontent. I cry because my barnacle encrusted cave and swirling pink shell half-hid in the sand are not enough. My fish spurns their haven. He swims with sharks for glory and will end up eaten. Stuck on the hook of mediocrity, he'll float belly-up, common story. He is not as strong or stubborn as I, the leathery seaweed frond holding fast to my undersea rock though buffeted by rough currents and storm. I'm just another hook baited with a worm. I'll snag my fish and digest him raw on a lettuce leaf for supper, laving his bones to waste and biting into lemon to wash away the taste.

- Dawn Schauer

Books By Walter Sullivan

SOJOURN OF A STRANGER

New York: Henry Holt, 1957.

THE LONG, LONG LOVE

New York: Henry Holt, 1959.

DEATH BY MELANCHOLY: ESSAYS ON MODERN SOUTHERN FICTION Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972. \$16.95.

A REQUIEM FOR THE RENASCENCE: THE STATE OF FICTION IN THE MODERN SOUTH

Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976, pb.

A BAND OF PROPHETS: THE VANDERBILT AGRARIANS AFTER FIFTY Edited in collaboration with William C. Havard. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982. \$12.95.

WRITING FROM THE INSIDE

Written in collaboration with George Core. New York: Norton, 1982.

ALLEN TATE: A RECOLLECTION

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988. \$16.95.

— B. M.

Walter Sullivan

Walter Laurence Sullivan was born in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1924. Besides being a highly acclaimed author, he is a professor and was a first lieutenant in the Marine Corps. Sullivan calls himself a Roman Catholic and politically independent. He received his BA from Vanderbilt University and his MFA from the University of Iowa. Sullivan's works include novels and books of criticism, as well as many short stories and articles contributed to literary journals. Walter Sullivan currently resides in Nashville.

Regarding Poetry Submissions
It is necessary to declare a moratorium on poetry considerations until further notice.

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